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FROM <Bonehead> TO <cLoNehEAd> : NICKNAMES, PLAY, AND IDENTITY ON INTERNET RELAY CHAT

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Abstract

This article examines nicknames of IRC users. On IRC, a person's physical existence and identity must be condensed textually into a single line which states his or her nickname, the electronic address, and a slogan or the person's real name. IRC users attempt to make these representational elements as prominent as possible, by choosing an original nick which will tempt other participants to strike up a conversation. In this paper I demonstrate that although people play many kinds of games with their nicknames, the nicks they choose are very important to them. They are an inherent part of their Net- identity, and even of their "real-life" identity. Two hundred sixty nicknames were collected from IRC logs, and were analyzed and classified. Only rarely did the IRCers in this study use their real names. The largest category was that of nicks related to the self in some way, referring to character traits, physical appearance, the physiological or psychological state of the self, or the person's profession or hobbies. The list of nicknames and the relative frequency of the different categories illustrate prominent features of electronic culture, a culture in

which the individual is placed at the center. Participants in this culture have a high awareness of technology and technological change. They value linguistic virtuosity, yet they show contempt for the rules of the language. Although there is freedom to engage in constantly changing identity games through the manipulation of nicks, most people tend to keep to one nick for a long period of time.

Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has created new opportunities for real-time “chatting” among geographically dispersed individuals sitting at their computer keyboards. People engage in “written” conversation in the new linguistic genre, which combines characteristics of both written and oral language. They type their messages, and the text of these messages appears on the screens of their interlocutors, preceded by the “speaker’s” nickname.

Internet Relay Chat, known for short as IRC, is a popular electronic environment² which people enter in order to interact with others from around the globe, at any hour of the day or night. At any given moment, the number of participants on the various channels ranges from 2,500 to 10,000. (When I began the research, the number of IRC users at any given time was approaching 6000. During my year of field work the number rose to an average of 8,000 and even sometimes topped 10,000.)

This environment contains hundreds of channels, in which different conversations are held. The types of channels vary widely. Some are identified by the name of a country, e.g., #israel or #gb (Great Britain), in which case they attract people from that particular country, or people interested in it. Other channels are for people with common interests; for example in a channel called #poets, people read out poems they write, support others or offer criticism. There are also channels geared towards particular age groups: #30plus, #35plus, #41plus. Others deal in technology: #os2, #www, #mac, etc. It takes time to learn one's way around IRC. As Badgett and Sandler note, “Learning your way around IRC is a lot like learning another language, finding your way around a new town, or playing blind man's bluff. But there's also nothing like it” ([Badgett and Sandler, 1993](#): 157).

Upon entering IRC, a person chooses a nickname, known in IRC jargon as a “nick,” for short. To choose a nick one must enter the following command: /nick “nickname”. Nicks can be changed at any time, even every few seconds, by repeating the same command. Since a person's physical existence and identity must be condensed textually into a single line which states the nickname and the electronic address, the person will attempt to make these representational elements as prominent as possible. The way to do so is to choose an original nick which conveys something about the person's “self” and which will tempt other participants to strike up a conversation with that person.

In this form of interaction, where one cannot see the speaker or obtain even minimal information such as sex, approximate age, skin color, race etc.–information which is easily obtainable in face-to-face interactions. Nicknames are thus a critical means of presenting ourselves. They are the only initial way of saying who we are, in literally one word or one expression. In this paper, I attempt to map the variety of nicks adopted by users, in order to demonstrate some of the IRC community's characteristics.

In July, 1994, I joined the #Germany channel, and noticed a certain participant who called himself <cLoNehEAd> . Like all nicks on IRC, this person's nick always appears on screen within angle-brackets; following this practice and to convey something of IRC typographic subculture, I will present all IRC nicks mentioned in this paper in angle-brackets too. I sent this person a private message asking why he or she chose this particular nickname. The

following day I received a private, humorous e-mail letter from him, with a long and surprising explanation of how his name came to be. This letter is reproduced below, nearly in its entirety, and with all its infelicities of spelling, language and typography retained.

...Once upon a time, in the golden days of the net.society there was peace and understanding among the net.people, who used to treat themselves with respect and honor. Those were the days, when that who calles himself "cLoNehEAd" in the irc, was not known as "cLoNehEAd", but as "bonehead" the peaceful. He was given the name by his friends because of the "bony" anatomy of his face. The days went by and bonehead explored the marvels of Cyberspace and enjoyed them a lot. Then one fine day, clouds of mischief and terror darkened the previously bright horizon of bonehead cyberland.

It all began with an email.

But before that, we have to take a look at the situation, bonehead lived in, when he was in the so-called "real world", I mean the one with all the cars, the buildings and the insurance-companies in it.

Bonehead was a student. Bonehead had made a career move and became tutor for the internet. The job paid a few bucks and bonehead could do, what he enjoyed most, namely : wander through the wonders of Cyberland. But the so-called "real World" didn't stop revolving, which can be a disadvantage, as it contains not only cars, buildings and insurance-companies, but also some misguided jerks, miscreants of an unthinkable kind, that spend their time shaving their heads, wearing Nazi-Uniforms and burning down houses of foreigners.

Bonehead received an e-mail. It was sent from one of the students of his internet-course. The contents made the blood on our little hero's veins freeze. His fellow_netter had discovered a painful fact, a fact that would tear down all of boneheads net.identity; a fact that would change his Cyber.life from one day to another at 180 degrees. He would have to begin from the start. All lost, thousands of .ircrc's would have to be rewritten, thousands of notify-entrys would have to be changed, millions of friends had to be informed, the amount of the incident was unspeakable.

The fact that his fellow_netter found out was the following : The misguided jerks, miscreants of the unthinkable kind, that spend their time shaving their heads, wearing Nazi-Uniforms and burning down foreigner's houses did not only shave their heads, wear Nazi-Uniforms and burn down foreigner's houses, no, they did more : they called themselves "BONEHEADS".

Our little hero was desperate. what if someone mistook him on the net for a misguided jerk, a miscreant of an unthinkable kind, that spends his time shaving his heads, wearing Nazi- Uniforms and burning down houses of foreigners? Bonehead certainly did NOT want to be mistaken for a misguided jerk, miscreant of (...you get the idea...).

Something had to be done.

Our little now nameless hero pondered and pondered. use his initials? BKW - sounded like a german car! he arrived at a very important conclusion :

He had to clone his nickname.

As soon as this thought flashed through his brain he had the answer : daehenoB ! thats it! "bonehead" reversed! sounds like an announce of revolution against the misguided jerks! But stop! wouldn't that imply being a "leaded" jerk, shaving his feet, wearing nothing at all, and

throwing water-balloons into the houses of unguilty foreign families? Sounds like an idea that needs some improvement.

Our hero forgot about it. He didn't join the irc, signed e-mail with his real name and -you guessed it- became LAME. weeks went by like this. Then one fine day in history, the old spirit rised again. Friends were doing a project with a cable-tv channel, that included establishing an irc-channel, inviting people to it, film the whole thing and broadcast it live through the wire. An irc-man was in need. Time for ex-bonehead to jump in. But when he entered the irc, his past got to him.

"Please enter nickname:"

"Please enter nickname:!"

"Enter you f**king Nickname, LAMER!"

The good old irc-2.2.7-client, once his best friend, screamed at him with an uproar of jealousy. "Long time no see" it seemed to say, with a grim undertone. Thoughts flashed through Bernhard's brain with the intensity of a borg-ship attacking the starship enterprise.

"I have to clone my nick, i have to clone bonehead, i have to *BAZONK!*

He had it. no shadow of a doubt. Not one single voice in his now crystal clear head disagreed. He had found his new identity. Everything would come up roses. People would know, that it was *him* behind this new nickname, Noone would ever steal this nickname, and nobody from any world would think he was wearing a Nazi-Uniform.

He typed: C L O N E H E A D

Now he was ready to face all channel pirates that had gathered in the broadcasted channel. His fingers conducted a concerto grosso furioso on his keyboard, his thoughts seemed to flow right out of his brain into the channel, the borderline between man and machine had vanished into the deep black hole of /dev/null.

HE WAS BACK.

(Bernhard K. Weisshuhn, sat jul 2, 1994. bkw@chemie.fu-berlin.de) To see photographs of <cLoNehEAd>, press : CLONE1 or CLONE2

Although written humorously, this letter strikingly brings home the importance of nicknames to IRC people, and the extent to which they have become an important part of the electronic self. Just as material possessions are experienced as significant extensions of the self ([Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981](#); [Belk, 1988](#); [Dittmar, 1992](#)), so, we shall see in this paper, even the most elementary symbolic or intellectual property—in this case one's nickname—is experienced as an extension of the self.

When people are unable to use their nicknames, they may feel "paralyzed", and unable to enter the social milieu with which they had identified for a long period of time. As we can see in the case of <cLoNehEAd>, many people regard their nicknames with the utmost importance, and much thought is put into their creation. The range of nicknames is enormous. In some cases, they invite certain associations and connotations; in others, they play with words or with the sounds of language, etc. Later on in this paper, I will look at these aspects of nicknames in detail.

There are a few technical limitations on the choice of IRC nicks: (1) the nick may consist of up to 9 typographic symbols (with no spaces in between); (2) not all keyboard symbols may be used; the permitted symbols are: all letters of the alphabet, both lower and upper case, all numbers, hyphens,

lines, the ^ symbol, and the [] symbols; (3) two people cannot use the same nick simultaneously. Apart from these limitations, a person may choose any nick whatsoever, be it a word without a meaning, a word with several meanings, a string of words or a phrase.

The variety of nicks provides a rich corpus for psychological, socio-anthropological and linguistic studies. Just as the names and nicknames used by people in real-world society may enlighten us about characteristics and trends in that society, so IRC nicks can shed light on the emergent virtual society. References to collective cultural, ethnic, and religious themes in nicknames might indicate that the individual belongs to a certain social group.

Emergent IRC culture is a culture of linguistic virtuosity on the one hand, and of contempt for the rules of the language on the other. It is a culture with a strong affinity for technology, which develops both in relation to, and despite objective anonymity. It is a culture which provides freedom in abundance to engage in identity games through the use of nicknames. In this environment, people can create their own identity "from scratch." They can change it, and play around with it, constantly, if they choose. However, as I will illustrate, later on, in fact, most people tend to keep to one nick and one identity for a long period of time, and to become deeply attached to it. Thus, although IRC provides its participants with the freedom to play with identities, people usually prefer the social attributes of a permanent, recognized identity. This is well illustrated in <cLoNehEAd>'s letter, who was worried that people won't know that it is "him".

After a long period of being known by his nick, <Bonehead> is compelled to give it up and experiences an electronic identity crisis which lasts until he is able to find a new name. The new name he chooses for himself reflects the process he went through. It meets many needs: it sounds like his old name, it is highly unlikely someone will use the same name, and most important of all—it has some connection to his previous name without arousing the negative connotations linked with it. The nick <cLoNehEAd> meets all these needs and enables Bernhard to continue to perform in his electronic surroundings. It is a name composed of nine letters which carries a wealth of information, as do most IRC nicks which are not a random string of symbols and have fascinating stories to tell.

NAMES AND IDENTITY

A person's name is a kind of marker which defines the inner and outer being of that specific person. Although it may consist of a lone word, it can evoke a complex image in the mind of a person who utters it. Our name is an important part of our identity and accompanies us for a long time, usually from the day we are born till the day we die.

Infants are aware of their names as part of their "selves" from as early age of one year or two. They hear their names called and are sensitive to compliments or criticism accompanying them. Children learn to speak their names before they learn to say "I", and they need their names in order to refer to themselves ([Piaget, 1975](#)).

Even after the children have grown, become educated, and developed a personality of their own, their name remains one of the unchanging aspects of their identity. And it is this word, the one most closely linked to our identity, which is given to us by others, sometimes even before we are born. Our names are chosen according to our parents' or their friends' preferences and conceptions, not our own.

Many people believe that there is a strong link between one's name and personality, between a name and the person's characteristics, and even between one's name and one's destiny. In *_Totem and Taboo_*, [Freud \(1950\)](#) claims that the most important thing for a primitive person is his or her name. [Frazer \(1963\)](#) adds that primitive people regard their name as an integral part of themselves, an element subject to the manipulations of

witchcraft. Anthropologists have noticed the great importance given to names in certain societies. Levy-Bruhl (1976) illustrates methods used in different tribes to discover thieves:

What matters to them is to have a mystic hold over the thief. They can then employ powerful means of magic to discover his name. If they are successful, then they have him and he will not escape them, for to primitives, the name serves not only to designate individuals. It is an integral of the personality, it participates in it. If the name is discovered, the personality is mastered." (Levy-Bruhl, 1976, cited in [Morgan, O'Neill and Harre', 1979](#): 6).

According to [Ong \(1982\)](#), oral cultures regard names with utmost importance and believe they have magical qualities. There is evidence that even in modern and literate cultures similar attitudes towards names exist.

Despite our rejection of the superstitious views of our benighted ancestors, we have not altogether discarded the belief in a virtue of names, except that our motives are more practical than moral ([Jonathan-Jacobs, 1969](#): 27).

[Morgan, et al. \(1979\)](#) claim to find evidence of a widespread belief that a person's name represents his essence, whether physical or mental.

At times we choose names for frightening or unfamiliar objects which domesticate them, or neutralize their negative connotations. Thus, the Loch Ness monster is nicknamed "Nessy", as if she were a cute kitten. Hurricanes are regularly given names of people. Until recently, they were given female names; when the feminists complained, men's names began to be used too.

The entire domain of computer technology is an intriguing site for the study of names. Many people are intimidated by the new technology, refrain from using computers and are apprehensive about approaching them. Even among computer professionals there is a tendency to personalize the impersonal machine. The mainframe computers at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem are named after comic strip characters, planets, or popular foods—"Olive," "Pluto," "Noga," "Humus" (a popular spread made from chick peas), "Shum" (Hebrew for "garlic"), and "Bonbon," thus fostering a more familiar and friendly feeling towards the computer. The names of many software packages also invoke associations other than those related to computers. A particularly striking example is the decision of the Microsoft corporation to call its extra-user-friendly software for people afraid of computers "Bob."

A name can be used to glorify a certain object. Ships are often named after queens or other lofty subjects. The "Queen Elizabeth" continues to market its high status as a luxury cruise ship via its royal name. Another instance of the importance of names is that, to this day, according to Jewish tradition, a person who is deathly ill may change his or her name in order to defy the angel of death ([Jonathan-Jacobs, 1969](#)).

Some names carry such strong and distinctive connotations that they become concepts in their own right. For example "Machiavellian," "Orwellian," "McCarthyism," etc. Sometimes names become a kind of verbal shorthand for social stereotypes. For example, during the establishment of the State of Israel, the popular name "Zalman" gradually came to represent a socially awkward person. Two generations later the name "Yoram" replaced it, eliciting similar connotations.

The name of a person can affect his or her entire future because of cultural connotations associated with that name. Research evidence shows that many names have stable stereotypes associated with them. **Sumser (1992)** studied the ability of university students to guess the “correct” name for various characters in television serials. His findings suggest that the names given to characters in prime time television dramas often serve as stereotypes for persons of a given social status and with specific characteristics. **Morgan, O'Neill & Harre' (1979)** asked their interviewees to select the ten most popular names of men and of women and to give a short description of the behavior expected of the people bearing those names. Some of the names were ascribed very distinctive characteristics, as can be seen in the following examples:

Christopher – fair-haired, tall and charming

Nicholas – pleasant

Matthew – quiet and studious

Gloria – blonde and outgoing

Mary – gentle

Alexandra – superior

The reverse experiment was conducted as well. Interviewees were given a list of characteristics and asked to match a name to each list. Here too the findings were clear-cut. In further research Morgan et al. examined the criteria used by parents and the process they go through when choosing a name for their child. Their findings indicate that parents usually consult friends or relatives and even books, when choosing a name, and that there is a tendency to coordinate the first and last name so that they will go well together (**Morgan, O'Neill, Harre', 1979**). **Lieberson and Bell (1992)** also claim that stable stereotypes affect the name-giving process. Parents take great care in choosing names for their children, and understand, whether consciously or subconsciously, the strong link between a person's name and his or her identity.

A man's name is not like a cloak that merely hangs around him, that may be loosened and tightened at will. It's a perfectly fitting garment. It grows over him like his very skin. One cannot scrape and scratch at it without injuring the man himself (Dichtung und Wahrheit, cited in Zabeh, 1968:5).

In short, names become an integral part of the self, the way people perceive themselves, and the way they are perceived by others. This is especially the case when people change their names or adopt a nickname. **Strauss (1969)**, who interviewed people who changed their names, claims that a name chosen by a person is more strongly linked to his or her identity than the name chosen for him or her by another person.

Nicknames and Identities

A nickname is a name we receive in addition to our legal name. Some people use a nickname throughout their entire lives. “A nickname is an Eke-name, derived from the old English verb _ecan_, meaning ‘to add to or augment’, thus an eke-name was a name given to a person over and above his legal or Baptismal name” (**Morgan, O'Neill and Harre', 1979**: 16). Many nicknames are puns on the legal name, either rhyming with, or sounding like them. Some nicknames are based on phonetic similarity, initials (“O.J” Simpson), semantic derivations, parts of the legal name (“Rob” from “Robert”),

additions to the legal name (the Hebrew "Haimke" as an affectionate derivative of "Haim"), etc. Some nicknames derive from the person's appearance, including weight ("Fatso"), height ("Langer" originally in Yiddish, used in Hebrew slang for "tall"), hair color ("Red" in English or "Gingie" in Hebrew; "Blondie"), skin color, from personal habits or traits, biographical incidents, etc.

Our nicknames are usually given to us by the people surrounding us, and a person can have more than one nickname, depending on the number of his or her social circles. Sometimes people are "stuck" with nicknames which were given to them by others, and which cause them to feel uncomfortable. Nicknames might even affect their own self-image and the way they are seen by others. Less frequently and usually within social frames which manifest some degree of playfulness, a person will choose his own nick. A self-chosen nick will augment a person's self-image. That nick will not necessarily reflect personality traits or characteristics, or a person's external appearance, but might also mirror that person's aspirations or dreams. Our nicknames can remain with us throughout our lives, or disappear with time, or when a change occurs in our lives. Sometimes we attempt to slough off our childhood nicknames when we grow up. Thus, a person called "Bobbie" in childhood may insist on being called "Bob" or even Robert by friends and colleagues in early adulthood, though parents and immediate family may continue to call him "Bobbie" all his life, whether he likes it or not.

In [Blum-Kulka and Katriel's \(1991\)](#) study of nicknaming practices among native-born Israeli, American-born Israeli, and Jewish-American families, native Israeli parents preferred nicknames to a real name or term of endearment more than Jewish American and American families. Nicknames can be used differentially even within families. Thus, in Blum-Kulka and Katriel's study:

...in one of our Israeli Jewish families, a fifteen year old boy whose name is Avraham is addressed by everyone except his grandmother as "Rami." His grandmother calls him "Avremele", a choice of nickname that testifies to a loyalty to the Jewish origin of the name, with the diminutive "le" pointing more specifically to an Eastern European, Yiddish speaking tradition ([Blum-Kulka and Katriel, 1991](#): 17).

While names have legal consequences, nicknames do not. In modern societies, children's names are legally registered at birth, and the legal name must appear on all official documents, throughout one's life. As with names, the symbolic content of nicknames may also reflect cultural patterns and processes of social change.

Stage Names, Nicknames, and Performance

Names and nicknames are often manipulated in connection with matters of performance. The name is a way of highlighting identity and claiming or celebrating prowess as a performer. In the West, actors and popular musicians frequently adopt stage names or nicknames. Often, people seeking fame change their name, in the belief that the name may have the power to bring them fame. Marilyn Monroe's real name was Norma Jean; Tony Curtis changed his name from Bernard Schults. Elton John was once Reg Dwight.

In the field of music, there is considerable variation in the extent to which different musical subcultures foster expressive naming practices. Most performers in the classical music tradition apparently retain their given names, and avoid using nicknames in public appearances, thus implicitly signaling the claim of this musical tradition to "high culture." Among the informal, expressive subcultures of popular music, on the other hand, such as jazz, blues, rock and pop, nicknames are common for individuals, and of course, groups adopt names of often surprising and even shocking expressivity (e.g., the "Grateful Dead," "Rolling Stones", the "Beatles", the "Sex Pistols"). In a study conducted by [Skipper and Leslie \(1988\)](#),

nicknames were by far more common among male than female blues singers. The researchers attribute this to a difference in the attitude towards men and women in the United States.

Stage names have also been important in Far Eastern traditions of performance, though the specific practices are remarkably different from those we know in the West. In many arenas of performance in traditional Japanese culture, individuals have names unique to their speciality, whether it be pottery, the tea ceremony, calligraphy, Kabuki theater, or the arts of the geisha. Individuals known for their accomplishments in more than one field may even have a different performance name within each one (Dalby, 1983: 35).

Kabuki actors have both stage names and nicknames. Unlike actors in the Western world, who change their name at will in order to facilitate their way to stardom, a Japanese actor must "earn" his stage name. Kabuki actors have several stage names and each one bears a special meaning. If a Kabuki actor is good, he is entitled to bear his father's stage name. If he is outstanding, he receives the name saved for eminent family members, which may not have been in use for generations ([Bowers, 1974](#)). Names may be passed on for many generations, and "elaborate...ceremonies are held to announce the succession to an actor's name by a new actor" ([Inoura and Kawatake, 1981](#): 195). Japanese woodblock prints of kabuki actors document the phenomenon of the passing on of a name from one generation to the next; for instance, actors known as Nakamura Utaemon IV and Nakamura Shikan III are shown in a print by Utagawa Kunimasu ([Earle, 1986](#): 134- 135).

It may seem surprising that actors have nicknames if they have stage names. Up until the 19th century, it was prohibited for anybody in Japan other than high ranking nobles of the samurai warrior class to bear more than one name. Kabuki actors took on "yagos", special nicknames used instead of surnames solely by actors, and these are used to this day. The "yago" usually ends with a "ya" and defines something related to the actor, for example his birthplace. This nickname is used not just by a single actor but by entire families of actors. For example, the Ichikawa family's yago is "Naritaya" because only after the head of the family prayed for success at a temple in Narita (near Tokyo), did his theatrical success boom ([Bowers, 1974](#)).

Returning to the arena of popular culture in the West, we should also note that among graffiti artists, there is a strong connection between one's nickname and performance. Artists create a "tag" for themselves, a stylized signature, which is a central element of their art, a sign of the artist's presence ([Cooper & Chalfant, 1984](#); [Lachmann, 1984](#); [Stewart, 1987](#)). Most graffiti artists choose new names for themselves, their considerations being aesthetic and social for the most part (wanting to belong to a group). In [Kohl's \(1972\)](#) study of nicknames adopted by Puerto Rican teenage graffiti writers in a New York neighborhood, he learned of various aspects of the children's personalities from their nicknames. Johnny's "graffiti name" was "Bolita", meaning little ball in Spanish, a nickname given to him by his mother in childhood, because he was small and energetic. Jaime was nicknamed "Batman"- a name which he himself chose because of a personal fantasy. Maria was nicknamed "Black" because of her negative attitude. Fourteen-year-old Johnny reports: "Some kids had as many as four nicknames: a first from their parents, a second from their friends, a third from their teachers and a fourth they chose for themselves" ([Kohl, 1972](#):112).

Graffiti artists zealously guard their nicknames, because this name represents their identity and style. As Susan Stewart points out, "One of the principal rules of the writer's code of ethics is that the writer cannot copy...either the tag or the style of another writer without instigating a cross-out war, or, more directly, a first-person fight" ([Stewart, 1987](#):165-166).

In many genres of computer-mediated communication, as with graffiti and the worlds of the performing arts, users have the privilege of choosing a nickname. A person chooses a "net name", and can keep it or change it at will. Individuals can even have multiple nicknames—a different one for each

chat forum in which they participate. Sometimes people include their various nicknames in their signature files. As we shall see later on in this paper, participants on IRC recognize the “rights” of others over their nicknames, and nicknames are central to these new written forms of performance.

As the preceding discussion suggests, in all the arenas where performance is central, nicknames and stage names are designed to call attention to the unique talents of the individual. This is something like the principle of “conspicuous marking” in nature—the male peacock’s feathers are designed to call attention to him. But stage names and nicknames can also hide aspects of identity, just as camouflage in nature serves to hide an animal—the chameleon changes its colors in accordance with the surroundings ([Gombrich, 1984](#)). Sometimes stage names and nicknames only serve to call attention to the person; but in other cases they may, at the same time, intentionally mask other aspects of identity. Thus 19th century women writers often used pen names because women were not generally accepted as writers. George Eliot and George Sand are notable examples. In our own times, Jews have often been known to change their names to hide their origins because of fears of anti-Semitism, particularly if they are in the public eye, like actors.

Hackers' Nicknames

Hackers are virtuoso computer programmers with an anti-institutional, even subversive bias, who delight in finding loopholes in software security systems. The word “hacker” is often associated in the public mind with various computer crimes. The use of “handles” is very common in hacker culture. Hackers use them to highlight a certain aspect of their character, and the handle can reveal if its owner is a “lamer” (incompetent) or is sophisticated ([Meyer and Thomas, 1990](#)). It may be that the use of handles originated from the need to evade the law. A person would invent a nickname which would identify him solely to other hackers, but “outsiders” would remain ignorant as to his identity.

Hackers' handles reflect many of the considerations discussed above. In an article on hacker crimes [Slatalla and Quittner \(1994\)](#) give examples of hackers' handles, and explain them:

Paul Stira (Scorpion) - He chose his on line name in junior high school after he cracked some software copyright protections. “The game cracked by scorpion” sounded more glamorous than “This game cracked by adolescent in outer borough.”

Mark Abene (Phiber Optik), perhaps the best known hacker of the late 1980s, and a true expert in telephone company arcana. He switched handles from II duce to Phiber Optik, a homage to that most capacious of information conduits fiber-optic cable... ([Slatalla and Quittner, 1994](#): 150-151).

Hackers are proud of their names. Many names are borrowed from science fiction anti-heroes, and from adventure stories. The younger hackers like to choose their names from lyrics by the “Heavy Metal” rock group. Hackers also like names consisting of puns related to technological terms, rebellion, nonconformism and violence. They treat their names with great respect and their norms strictly prohibit them from using another hacker's handle, or from using a number of handles ([Meyer and Thomas, 1990](#)). The playfulness of hackers with language and symbols ([Raymond, 1991](#)) is in evidence in their nicknames too; as we just saw, Mark Abene spells his nickname “Phiber Optik” rather than “Fiber Optic,” replacing “f” with “ph” and “c” with “k”.

Nicknames in Citizens' Band Radio

CB (Citizen's Band) radio, in the United States enables its users to choose their own names. CB radio is a two-way form of communication, used over short distances. It started as wireless communication for truck drivers, who informed each other of traffic conditions, and who sought company while on the road. CB members invent a handle to identify themselves before they start talking on the radio. The nickname usually reflects an element of the person's identity, whether a hobby, a place, a character trait etc. People who know they will never meet face-to-face invent nicknames which give expression to their fantasies or convey sexual connotations, stereotypes, etc. The nickname is the initial and only information, other than the voice, which a CB user provides about himself or herself, the first disclosure of one's identity, and must be chosen with care and easy to use both for the speaker and for the listener (**Kalcik, 1985**).

Kalcik (1985) studied nicknames chosen by CB users. One of the most striking findings was that women chose to use two types of stereotypical names: those related to "decent women"—one man's woman, decent, modest—and those related to "indecent women"—wild women. The reason for this, according to Kalcik, is that CB society is similar to that of the American pioneers, who lived in an age when sex roles were clearly defined. One of the central subjects of conversation on CB is nicknames. CBers often discuss the significance and appropriateness of one another's handles and exchange stories about how they chose them (**Kalcik, 1985**).

NICKS IN IRC IDENTITY GAMES

The technology of CMC, and of IRC in particular, invites play with identity. All people need to do to change their identity is to adopt a nick. As I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, upon joining IRC, a person types, for instance

/nick Topsy

Instantly, an acknowledgment appears on the screen:

***So-and-so is now known as Topsy.

IRC is similar to CB radio in some respects. It is a form of mediated communication characterized by considerable intimacy among participants who cannot see each other. However, as opposed to CB radio, where we can obtain information about a person from his or her voice (sex, sometimes age, accent, linguistic register), IRC provides us only with written texts. Like other text-based forms of CMC, IRC is for the most part a "silent," stripped-down medium: there is no way for us to obtain even the most elementary information about the person with whom we are talking, other than what is explicit or can be inferred from the text itself. And of course, even what appears in the text may not be an accurate representation of the person's identity. It is therefore a totally different environment, with its own characteristics. Nicknames are therefore particularly important in identifying the people hiding behind the keyboard.

Some IRC players now exchange photographs on-line, or view them in archives on the World Wide Web while off-line (URL links :

<http://www.srv.net/people/bia/30plus.html#30plus> (<http://www.srv.net/people/bia/30plus.html>), <http://ispstat.alcd.soton.ac.uk/gb.html#g>

(<http://lispstat.alcd.soton.ac.uk/gb.html>), and <http://www.webknx.com/ppl.shtml#israel> (<http://www.webknx.com/ppl.shtml>).) and new technologies are being developed which may enrich communication on IRC in the future (CUSeeMe, Internet Phone). Although these technologies may transform the nature of communication on IRC in some ways, the symbolic importance of nicks in an almost exclusively text-based mode certainly characterized the period studied in this paper, and will very likely continue to characterize IRC encounters in the near future.

In personal interaction, it is possible to acquire information about people by looking at them. We can obtain information regarding sex, race, skin color, and approximate age. A person's appearance and body language reveal aspects of his or her personality, state of mind and physical state at that moment. Clothes and other accessories reveal information regarding social status, occupation, place of residence, and other social aspects. Clothing is in a sense like sign language, a form of non-verbal communication. "To choose clothes, either in a store or at home, is to define and describe ourselves" (Lurie, 1981: 5).

In contrast to face-to-face encounters, then, computer networks nullify our physical existence. In a way, they free us from inhibitions created by our physical identity. We are more equal on the net because we can ignore it, and create a new self in cyberspace. At the same time personal contact becomes optional, and there is no need ever to face others known only virtually (Heim, 1991). Michael Heim has speculated that the seductiveness of virtual relationships may be at the expense of the cultivation of real-life relationships.

Erving Goffman (1959) points out that during personal interaction people supply two types of information: information they intentionally provide and information they "give off," or reveal unintentionally. The latter operates as a control mechanism over the first. When interacting via computer, only one type of information is provided: information a person wishes to give, whether factual or fiction. A situation such as this enables one to play identity games rich in fantasy.

In real life, we often play identity games, aided by our clothes, our nicknames, and our behavior. By contrast, electronic means give the illusion that we can have it both ways: be ourselves on the net and play identity games (Benedikt, 1991). Or as Weiss comments, "A largely nonprejudicial environment is fostered in IRC's text-based world, where they say, this 'brain-in-a-jar' interaction also paves the way for a decidedly powerful fantasy element" (Weiss, 1994:59).

There is no way to clearly identify the speaker, a situation which enables a considerable amount of freedom in playing identity games. All one needs to do is change his/her nickname and play along with the new identity. Many men choose women's nicknames and adopt a feminine identity, and vice versa. Many stories of "gender cross-dressing" exist on the net, and two have already appeared in print. In one instance, mentioned by Allucquere Rosanne Stone (Stone, 1991: 82-83), a middle-aged male psychiatrist chose "Julie" for a nickname, and presented him (her) self as an old, lonely and crippled woman. Under this pretense, for three years he heard women's intimate stories, until one of the women tried to track Julie down, and discovered the truth. The rumor spread quickly and women who talked to Julie felt betrayed. "I feel as if I was raped," said one of them. A very similar case is reported by Van Gelder (1990).

A Typology of IRC Nicknames

The material for this paper was collected during a year of field research on IRC, mainly as a participant observer. Logs were automatically generated for all sessions observed, so that material could be analyzed at leisure, later on. For the purposes of this study of nicknames, I took all material logged during two weeks in April 1994 from various channels. Most nicknames were taken from the following channels:

#NICECAFE: a virtual coffee shop, where people discuss various issues, usually light and cheerful topics.

#IRCbar: a bar where people “drink” and talk about anything under the sun. The topics are usually light.

#Truthdare: a channel where people play “truth or dare”. Each participant in turn gives information about him/herself : sex, age, location, sexual preferences (heterosexual, homosexual), and any other information s/he desires to reveal. The “victim” is then asked a personal question, usually a very intimate question, and s/he must answer in detail. After answering s/he can then choose a new “victim” and ask a question.

#30plus: a channel attempting to attract people aged thirty and above. We of course can never definitely know participants' real age; however it is reasonable to assume that most are in that age group. The topics discussed vary.

It is worth noting that due to the fact that IRC is a medium which fosters a high degree of playfulness, conversation on most channels is light and playful. There are frequent references to nicknames, age, sex, occupation, weather, travel information, inquiries about good restaurants, jokes and general small talk. With the exclusion of the technological channels, where people ask technical or other related questions, topics of conversation on most IRC channels are similar, regardless of the channel's name. Whether the name is #music, #arts, #romance, #love, #chat, #israel, or #41plus etc., the topics of discussion do not vary much. In times of disaster, however, IRC is transformed into a medium for spreading first-hand news. For example during the California earthquake of 1993, a special #earthquake channel was opened, where people gave out information, and inquired about loved ones. Similarly, IRC was mobilized in the aftermath of the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City and the earthquake in Kobe, Japan. Nevertheless, in general, IRC is mainly a playful recreational medium.

In addition to nicknames from the four channels I analyzed, I also added other names which I encountered on various other channels during the above-mentioned period. I joined the channels for three to four hours every evening, and studied the nicks. I asked most people about the origin of their nicks, a question which did not always receive an answer. I did not reveal that I was studying nicks. Generally, the question was accepted as part of the normal getting-acquainted process on IRC. This specific corpus includes 260 names and nicknames from around the globe (mainly from the United States, Europe and Israel). [to see the entire corpus, press LIST]. A preliminary analysis reveals that 55% chose nicknames consisting of one word and 45% chose nicknames consisting of more than one word or of a phrase. For example: “biggirl”, “itsMe”, etc. In other words, almost 50% of the participants chose to play with language and its possibilities. The first issue I studied was how many people prefer to use their real name as opposed to a “nick”. Only 18 users out of 260 used their real name, or 7% of the group. The remainder took advantage of the privilege of choosing a nickname.

My initial typology included 14 categories, two additional categories for those choosing to use their real name, and for nicks which could not be classified. Only 29 nicks, or 11% were not classifiable. Due to the large number of geographical locations and cultures represented, I may have failed to classify certain names properly. A cluster of words or letters which seems incomprehensible to me may mean something in Japanese, Swedish or Polish, or to members of cultures speaking these languages. Although I tried to interview most nickname bearers, I did not always receive an answer. Furthermore, not all participants converse well in English, thus making communication with them almost impossible (for example, there is a relatively large group of Mexicans on the net whose English is very poor).

The main categories are:

- 1 Nicks related to literature, fairy tales, characters from films, plays, and television. Examples: <Hagolem>, <Godot>, <MADhater>

- 2 Nicks related to flora and fauna—people choose names of animals, trees, flowers, fruits and vegetables. Examples: <froggy>, <tulip>
- 3 Nicknames named after famous people. These nicknames are taken from the real world as well, however, as opposed to names of flora and fauna, we find here a form of identification with or an attempt to be like another person. Examples: <Elvis>, <Yosi> (imitating the name of Yosi Sarid—a well-known Israeli politician).
- 4 Nicknames related to inanimate objects of different kinds, be it weapons, cars or different types of food. Examples: <BMW>, <Mig>
- 5 Nicknames pertaining to a person's "self": character traits—<shydude>; physical appearance —<belladonna>; description of the state of the "self"—<stoned>, <sleepless>, <metroman> (a New-Yorker who rides the subway often). Nicks indicating the person's profession – <director>, <pilot>, <medoctor>; various hobbies —<mares> (in Spanish a sea person) and various other nicknames in which the "self" is central.
- 6 Nicknames indicating affiliation with a certain place. Examples: <Dutchguy> <El_ingles>
- 7 Nicknames associating the person with a certain age group (young/old)—<cloudkid>.
- 8 Nicknames referring to a relationship with other persons—<bffiancee>.
- 9 Nicknames related to the medium, technology, computer names, software and IRC commands—<irc>, <kickme>.
- 10 Nicknames which make a meta-comment on the anonymity of the medium. IRCers are aware of the fact that the medium nullifies one's identity, and relate to this in their conversations and in their choice of nicks. Certain nicknames refer to their identity: <justl>, <me>, and even <unknown>. An especially clever example is an Israeli person who nicknamed himself <AZmi>, which can be read in Hebrew in two ways. The expression _azmi_ can be read to mean "myself—this is me," but also as two separate words, _Az mi?_—meaning "so who?", as if to raise the question "Who am I?" Other nicknames refer to the fact that there is no physical existence on IRC, that we are only a spirit, with no body, as in <soul> or <spirit>.
- 11 Nicknames containing play with language and typography. Some nicknames seem to have been taken from cryptic crossword puzzles, and their level of linguistic sophistication is extremely high. People create phrases, omitting vowels or consonants in such a way that the word remains legible. Some nicknames are words with double meanings or words written in reverse, for example: <gorf> ("frog" reversed), or <eehpcm> ("mcphee" reversed). Some nicknames create a phrase or a sentence by using the same letter twice: <whathell> (what the hell). This nick is particularly clever: the "t" in the expression serves simultaneously as the final "t" in "what" and as the initial "t" in "the", the "he" following this "t" both completes the word "the" and serves as the first two letters of "hell." In the nickname <myTboy> the person uses the letter "t" to represent a syllable, and the nick can then be read as "mighty boy" as well as "my T boy".
- 12 Nicknames using onomatopoeia, or imitation of sounds: <tamtam> which imitates the sound of a drum, <tototoo> imitating the sound of a train or a beeping horn, etc.
- 13 Sex-related nicknames: <sexygirl> <bigtoy>.
- 14 Provocative nicknames: <fuckjesus>.

Certain nicknames may fall under two or more categories, for example <kukyMNSTR> which fits category no. 1 (T.V. characters—the Cookie Monster from Sesame Street) and category no. 11 (puns - misspelling "cookie" and omitting vowels in the word "monster" in order to create a variation of this name). The nickname <sexsee> has at least three meanings: 1) a person claiming to be sexy, using sex as a dominant part of his identity; 2) a play on

words: deliberately misspelling the word by combining the words “sex” and “see” thus creating a new meaning; 3) obviously a sex-related term which openly declares the desire to discuss sex. Similarly, <coolfox> can fall under the “animal” category; however because the fox is also known to be a sly creature, the combination “coolfox” is more adequately classified in the “self”-related category, and interpreted as a person who sees himself as both cool and sly. And the reference to “fox” may even invite sexual connotations, as in “foxy lady.”

Table 1 presents the typology, and the frequency of the various nicknames in each category.

Table 1. Frequency of Different Types of Nicks.*

Category	N	Percent
Nicknames related to the self <shydude>, <baddady>, <handsom>	92	35.4%
Nicknames related to flora and fauna: <froggy>, <tulip>, <the-tiger>	27	10.4%
Technology- or medium-related nicknames: <pentium>, <aixy>	20+3	8.9%
Nicknames which play with language and typography: <whathell>, <BeaMeUp>, <myTboy>	15+5	7.7%
Reference to identity/lack of identity: <me>, <justl>, <unknown>	13+3	6.2%
Names of objects: <cheese>, <BMW>, <m-16>, <mig>	9	3.5%
Nicknames using famous names: <elvis>, <stalin>	7+1	3.1%
Nicknames from literature, TV, films, fairytales: <madhatter>, <rainman>	6	2.3%
Nicknames with play on sound: <tamtam>, <uh-uh>, <tototoo>	5+1	2.3%
Place-related nicknames: <dutchguy>, <el_ingles>, <irish>	5	1.9%
Sex-related nicknames: <sexpot>, <sexsee>, <bigtoy>	4+1	1.9%
Provocative nicknames: <hitler>, <hamas>, <fuckjesus>	4	1.5%

*Nicknames falling into more than one category are marked separately with a + sign in the second and third categories. Altogether, 260 nicknames were analyzed. The percentages refer to the total number in each row, regardless of whether certain nicknames were multiple-coded. Because of multiple coding, the percentages total more than 100%.

Category	N	Percent
Age related nicknames: <oldbear>, <cloudkid>	3+1	1.5%
Relational nicknames: <EKIMslave>, <Bfiancee>	3	1.2%
People using their real name	18	6.9%
Nicknames with no specific category	29	11.2%
Total	260+15	105.9%

*Nicknames falling into more than one category are marked separately with a + sign in the second and third categories. Altogether, 260 nicknames were analyzed. The percentages refer to the total number in each row, regardless of whether certain nicknames were multiple-coded. Because of multiple coding, the percentages total more than 100%.

In order to get a clearer picture, I collapsed the various categories. First, I eliminated the unclassifiable nicks; this left me with 231 nicks. I then grouped the self-related nicknames with the place-related, age-related and person-related nicks, the reason for this being that a person who calls himself <dutchman> discloses information about his self in the same way as a person who calls himself <tallman>. A person nicknaming himself <danlover> relates himself to another person, and a person who refers to himself as "old" is telling us something about his physical or mental age. Flora and fauna are now grouped with inanimate objects as "elements of our surroundings". Nicknames containing some form of identification with another figure were grouped together. This category thus includes the former "nicknames related to literature, fairy tales, films, and TV" and "nicknames named after famous people". I grouped together nicknames related to the medium and to technology with names related to identity/lack of identity, for they both illustrate the nature of the medium. This new category is now called: "nicknames related to the medium, technology and nature of medium". I combined nicknames containing play with language and typography with nicks containing a play on sounds, and sex- related names were combined with provocative names. The total number of categories in the new table is seven, the largest category being the self-related one, and the smallest being "sex related and provocative nicknames" (Table 2).

Table 2. Six Types of Nicks.*

Category	N	Percent
*Totals add up to more than 100% because of multiple coding.		

Category	N	Percent
People using their real name	18	7.8%
Self related names	103+1	45.0%
Names related to medium, technology and their nature	33+6	16.9%
Names of flora, fauna, objects	36	15.6%
Play on words and sounds	20+6	11.3%
Names related to figures in literature films, fairytales and famous people	13+1	6.1%
Names related to sex and provocation	8+1	3.9%
Total	231+15	106.6%

*Totals add up to more than 100% because of multiple coding.

It is evident from the table above that the most significant category is the one concerning the self, immediately after it, although far behind, is the category of nicknames related to technology and the medium. I expected the next category to be the one of play on words and sounds, and playfulness to be more evident in the nicknames than it turned out to be. However, to my surprise the third largest category was names of flora, fauna and objects. Only 11% of nicks play on words and sounds. Names related to other figures, whether fictional or real, in which people indicate identification with that figure constituted only 6% of the total, and nicks related to sex and provocation composed the smallest category with just under 4%.

Maintaining Nicknames on IRC

Despite the ease with which people can change their nicks, they rarely do so. On the contrary, people tend to keep the same nickname for a long period of time. I examined logs of channel #30plus beginning April 1994, through January 1995, and chose at random one log per month. It is clear from the logs that many of the nicknames appeared again and again during that period. New nicknames joined and others left, however people tend to keep the same nicknames.

<BMW> used the same nickname both in April 1994 and in January 1995, as did <infonut>. In 10 logs examined during 10 different months, the same nicknames appeared four or five times for example: <tomato>, <legges>, <nurse>, <neesey>, <coucou>, <joshtree>, <me3>, <pdq>, and <shebe>. Others were missing, perhaps only on the specific nights I examined. On the #GB (Great Britain) channel as well, there is a permanent group of participants who've been using this channel for two years or more (most of them), using the same nicknames: <eehpcm>, <weety>, <_bob_> <zobo>,

<kashka>, <Bopeep>, <clive>, <El_ingles>, <NeilM>, <mrsHaqa>, <haqa>, <HIDI>, <sambo>, <eve>, <danius>, <stimpy>, <gazza>, <_ed_>, <Dimashqe>, <meta>, <lorry>, <nazz>, <fluffs>, and others.

I examined the list of Israeli nicknames as well for several months (April to August 1994) and found that several nicknames were recurrent. For example: <kashbak>, <monblan>, <ehab>, <ssarminto>, <lesyla>, <meekG>, <ark>, <choo>, <underflow>, <Wilco>, <jack>, <vip>, <Ely>, <gosha>, <psychnaut>, <iliak>, <kashka>, <myc>, <mister-x>, <jackflash>, <artist>, <go>, <omry>, <justl>, <metalmout>, <dr_love>, <jazzcat>, <soul>, <tr>, <loo>, <ualla>, <darm>, <pif20>, <wassy>, <mig>, <agatha>, <fullmoon>, <mares>, <more>, <Icebreak>, <daphna>, <sunset>, <nitz>, <dr_casper>, <aermike>, <director>, <hunted> and many more. During my countless discussions with IRCers, it turned out that they had no qualms about changing their electronic address, or changing other bits of information about themselves, however they were adamant about keeping their nicknames because that is how they are known in the "electronic world", and how they're recognized by their friends. In order to locate a friend one can enter the command /notify nickname. The moment this person joins IRC, a message appears on the screen of the inquirer. Thus, it is difficult to maintain contact with a specific person over a period of time if s/he changes his/her nickname.

Due to the fact that the same two nicknames cannot exist on IRC simultaneously (the software does not enable this), there are situations in which people "steal" nicknames, whether deliberately or not. A person can join IRC at a certain hour only to find that someone is already using their nick. In log 1, we can see an IRC conversation in which a regular participant of channel #30plus, nicknamed <me3> joins the channel and discovers that his nickname is taken. Having no other choice, he calls himself <me33> and enters the channel. The discussion which then develops keeps going back to the topic of the loss of his name.

Log no. 1

irclog april 3 1994. 22:03 (Israel time), channel #30plus.

-
1. *me33 feels put out someone has taken my nick!!!
.....
 2. <daisee> hey me33... how'd you get 30 added to you nick???
.....
 3. <me33> daisee someone has taken my nick!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
.....
 4. <daisee> me33: the noive!!!
5. <me33> i dont know why... i msged, but no reply from them.
6. <sylvie> poor me3.
7. <me33> daisee i agree!
8. <adge> me is 31.
.....
 - 9.<me33> hmmmmm maybe you could all msg me3 the normal msges me3 gets.. i.e., ewwww go away, etc, that will make him/her give it up! :)
.....
 - 10.<msangee> me33 hi there
11.<infonut> /msg me33 i dont think you get silly messages
12.<me33> infonut yeah...but you can send a few to me3 now! it might help.
13.<infonut> me33- ok.
14.<cloudkid> me3 you look older ;)

.....
.....
15.***daisee is now known as daisee3
16.***cloudkid is now known as cloud33
.....
.....
17.***sylvie is now known as sylvie33
18.<cloud33> sylvie :))
19.***borghese is now known as borg33
.....
20.***coucou is now known as coucou69
21.<cloud33> *ouch*
22.<sylvie33> cloud33!!!
23.<coucou69> hehehe
24.<borg33> kayla, seattle =)
25.<kayla> it's glorious here... croucuses 'n' evrything :)
26.***daisee3 is now known as daisee33
27.***steven is now known as steven331
28.***infonut is now known as info33
29.<steven331> ops
30.*me33 feels like such a tredsetter today! :))
31.<prplhaze> what is with the 33?
32.***steven331 is now known as steven
33.<daisee> me33: see what you started????????????????????
34.<sylvie33>me33, y've always ben trendy! :)
35.*info33 lughs at borg33
36.<sylvie33> prpl, were being supportive of me33.
37.***cloud33 has changed the topic on channel #30plus to "if your name
doesnt have '33' in it do it now!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
38.***mermer has left channel #30plus
39.***capsean is now known as capt33

40.*me33 is loosing it now!!!
41.***firstmate is now known as mate33
42.***kayla is now known as kyla33
.....
43.***bmw is now known as bmw333333
44.<shebe> bmw has the most 3's, must be collecting them!!!
45.***signoff: duckie-(leaving)
.....
.....
46.<rossma> my ducks... having a difficult time dealing with this 33
crap. no sense of humor today.
47.<brojam> where do i get a '3'?
48.<daisee33> gotta run have a great weekend all you 33'rs!!!!!!
49.<bmw333333> came to think about it... 3 is not a good mumber for me
.....
50.<me33> hurrah!!!!!!!!!! me3 is gone!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
51.***me33 is now known as me3
52.***net33 is now known as annette
53.*annette has decided to act her age (not)
54.<me3> wheh!! feels much better.
55.***kyla33 is now known as kayla
56.***daisee33 is now known as daisee
57.***sylvie33 is now known as sylvie

Two major elements are evident in this episode: (1) <me33>'s feelings about losing his original name, his attempts to send private messages to the "thief", and finally when the "thief" leaves the IRC and <me33> can once again use his name, cries of joy and excitement. (2) The group identifies with the goings on and, in a playful manner, many of them add "33" to their names (lines 17, 19, 26, 27, 28 etc.). When <prplhaze> asks "what is with the 33?" <sylvie33> then answers "were being supportive of me33". They conduct a symbolic ceremony and even change the topic of the channel to "if your name doesn't have '33' in it, do it now!!!". The other participants immediately add "33" to their nickname. After <me33> reverts to his original name, so do the others, and the topic of conversation then resumes to the usual small talk. All those who changed their name to a name with 33 at the end go back to their original name.

Nickserv and the Regulation of Nicks

Struggles over nicknames were very common in the past, so much so that special software called "Nickser" was programmed in order to preserve nicknames of those who desired to do so. "I was the one who originally wrote nickserv," writes Armin Gruner, from Munich in his e-mail message (I got Gruner's e-mail address from Jarkko Oikarinen, the fellow who invented the concept of IRC and is responsible for the IRC program), "I decided to write it because there was a person who insisted on using my former nickname, though I changed it, I wrote Nickser to help other people preserving their nicknames."

Once a person registered his name on Nickser, no one else would be able to use the same name, even when the nickname owner was not on IRC. The introduction of this software was not really a product of collective deliberation and formal decision-making, rather, it was created by individuals to protect their own interests. Although Nickser was successful in preserving nicknames, it was also controversial because it gave an advantage to those who were technologically knowledgeable. If for example Mr. A registered a certain nickname on Nickser, but Mr.B. had been using that same name for two years and wasn't aware of this software, Mr. B. would suddenly be prohibited from using the name he'd been using all along.

Nickser "was born" on July 1990, and was shut down on April 8th, 1994 by the same person who created it. "Some people always argued about Nickser and its purpose, and even some operators killed it randomly. This was one of the reasons for the shutdown" (Gruner, e-mail communication, June 4, 1995). There were additional reasons, such as the dramatic increase in the number of Nickser users, which caused a significant Net overload.

"Nickser" was removed from IRC, and subsequently informal norms regarding usage of nicks developed. Just as graffiti artists have norms which guide them in using "tags", and hackers are prohibited from using another person's nickname or from using more than one name, so must IRCers conform to an informal code of ethics and regard a person's nickname as that person's property. Most IRCers are respectful of other people's nicknames and regard them as though they were copyrighted. If a person uses a certain nickname, and another person turns to him and tells him that that nickname is already taken, they will usually ask each other how long each of them has been using the nick, and the "senior user" would win. If there is a strong desire to use the same name, although it belongs to someone else, the junior user will add a hyphen or a number, thus slightly altering the original name. The nickname "princess" is very popular and several variations of it can be seen on IRC: princess, princess-, princess1,_princess, etc. Sometimes when a nickname is "stolen", Netters will sanction the thief, they will prevent his entry into certain channels, and will send him several nasty messages.

I have received several e-mail messages from people who know me by my nickname, telling me that someone else was using my name while I was "absent". On one occasion when I was on IRC and my name was intentionally stolen or simply reinvented by someone else, my electronic friends (people whom I have never seen, but have been conversing with me for over a year) sent messages to me reporting that my nick had been stolen, and wrote to that person asking him to give up the apparently stolen nickname. The messages were subtle at first but gradually became nastier until he relented and changed his name to "Muhamed".

In an e-mail message I once received, a person nicknamed "asd" explained how he chose his name, saying that at first he chose it because these are three consecutive keys on the keyboard and easy to type. After using this name several times he felt he couldn't part from it, because parting from the name would mean parting from all his IRC friends who know him by this nickname, and would be looking for it. As we can see, even if a name bears no special meaning, it becomes a part of our identity. If our relationships with Netters whom we met by chance and who know us solely by our nickname

are important to us (and most IRC friends are made by chance), then we will usually keep our nickname as though it were an important part of our identity.

Playing with Nicknames on IRC

As mentioned before, nicknames are a topic of conversation and many times the center of attention on IRC. Certain nicknames cannot be ignored, for example, <god> or <hitler>. A few months ago I met a guy on IRC who calls himself <HollyCow>. His name attracted a lot of attention the moment he entered the channel, and people started playing with his name. One person commented: "let's butcher him" and <HollyCow> responded: "you can't butcher me... im holy!!!". In the meantime, other people on the channel already started fantasizing about the juicy steaks they will make from the holy cow.

Third person singular is often used on IRC to describe actions, feelings etc. Entering the /me "comment" command will cause the following message to appear on the screen: *nickname comment. If for example my nickname is "vv", and I enter: /me is going to sleep, it would appear on the screen as "*vv is going to sleep". At times, when a person wants to make a definitive statement, but does not want this statement to be attributed to him he will change his nickname so that it becomes part of the sentence he wishes to write. For example:

***vv is now known as you

(he then enters the command: /me are silly), the result being:

*you are silly.

or:

***vv is now known as he (/me is so nice) *he is so nice.

When I chose a nick for myself, I looked for a name that would relate to this virtual world in which no sounds are heard, and I created a name which cannot be pronounced. The name I chose looks like a face, and consists of the following three typographic symbols: ^_^. In this way, I can express my feelings visually, and don't have to depend on words. For example, *^_* for when I blush or feel embarrassed, @_@ when I don't want to hear (as though wearing earphones), !_! or o^_^o when I feel festive. When I am tired and half asleep I will write ~_~, and when I'm even more tired and can barely keep my eyes open I look like this: -_- . My nickname elicits many and various responses, and several people asked me how to pronounce it. I was particularly impressed with a reaction by a person nicknamed tsam; she fondly calls me ^_&'e (in Hebrew "le" is added to the end of a name as a diminutive and a sign of affection).

A high degree of playfulness with names is evident. The games vary in their nature. The comments about "butchering" <HollyCow>, just mentioned, are just one example of playing with the content of names. The nick <god> provokes reactions like "oh my god" or "now i know god exists." This type of game is short though common. In another type of game, people play with their own nick. Log 2 is an example of a single person's playfulness triggered by my nickname:

Log 2

irclog 30 may 1994, channel #30plus

.....
<Maleman> cute, ^_~ (cant believe your silly nick)
***me157 (~me157@hub.gcr.com) has joined channel #30plus
***signoff: Treblig (leaving)
***timer has left channel #30plus
***chary is now known as ^^^
***Treblig (gil@limbic.ssdl.com) has joined channel #30plus
<imp> hi, me157 (am i only one who thinks of a highway when i see you?)
>chary :)))^__^
<Maleman> /nick =====>
<jack> bbl, foolks!
***signoff: me157 (leaving)
<dumpee> bye jack
***jackv has left channel #30plus
<____>^_~: you inspired an experiment :)
>____what experimant?
<dumpee>lol
<____>^_~: the new nick experiment
<imp> (666) getting my magnifying glass.
***____ is now known as 0^0
<imp> (^____) getting my magnifying glass and my bifocals!!
<dumpee> looks like mari is about to be droped.
<maribella> heh heh heh
<sexpot> HNG ALERT!!!
<rk>.
***0^0 is now known as 0^0^
<dumpee> HNG?
<WhichKing> horny net geek
<dumpee> oh... who?

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<Maleman> sex: you are the HNG?
***0^0^ is now known as {0}
<WhichKing> mm:hehe
<dumpee> va
***signoff: dumpee (broken pie)
<sexpot> ni male, i'm not, thank you.
***{0} is now known as {f}
<imp> oops, think i'll sit this one out.
<Maleman> sexpot: thought you were advertising. :)
***{f} is now known as {f}{sgl}{}
<sexpot> yeah right.
***{f}{sgl}{} is now known as {f-sgl-34}
<{f-sgl-34}> there that should answer all imprtant questions :)
> :)
<sexpot> thankd whichking
***signoff: limey (ping timeout)
<WhichKing> sex: sure :)
***{f-sgl-34} is now known as F-sgl-34
->*WhickKing* why did u call yourself Whichking, if i may ask??
***Achermar (Achermar@129.78.25.125) has joined channel #30plus
<F-sgl-34> HI achernar!!!
*WhickKing* no reason.
>well guys goodnight :)
***^ _ has left channel #30plus

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After meeting <^_> on a channel, <CHARY> experiments with different nicknames and changes her nick first to visually based names: ^^^, 0^0, 0^0^, {0}, and then continues with names that give out some information about herself, until she reaches the final version of "F-sgl-34". This final version, in her opinion, summarizes the important details about her (F=female, sgl= single, 34= her age). <CHARY>'s experiment is a reaction to the happenings on the channel (^_>'s entry), and she performs a "solo act" of searching for her identity. Finally, after finding a nickname which satisfies her, she keeps it for a while (for that evening only), but does not use it again ever after. In subsequent evenings she reverts to <CHARY>.

In log 3 we see a different type of game where several players use each others' nicknames. This log documents a meeting of a few electronic friends who in those days met frequently, and have known each other electronically for a number of months.

Log 3

irclog started mon July 4 1994, 00:50

***med-1 (mhamdim@dafne.mines.u-nancy.fr) has joined channel #^_-'s home
<tsam> any less cruel suggestions mares? (to the cats i mean...) :)
<med-1> hiiiiiii
<tsam> hi med-1 :)))
<pixie> cats?
<mares> hi med-1!!
>hi med :))
<med-1> hi tsameret :)
<mares> tsameret?
<tsam> med-1 my name is tsam
<med-1> ooops ok
<tsam> med-1 are you ok?
<med-1> i m KO :)
<mares> ko is good too
*** pixie is now known as tsameret
<tsameret> hehehe
>hehe :)
<tsam> mares soooo, what's up?
***^_^ is now known as pixie
<med-1> hehe
<mares> work and more work
<tsameret> hey!!!!!!!!!!!!
***med-1 is now known as ^_ ^
<^_ ^>hehe
<tsameret> hahahaha
>now ill get all your msges from girls :))))
<tsameret> hev have stop it ..

<tsam> pixie... :)

<^ ^> who wanna msg me

>:)))

<tsam> somebody has stolen my name :)))))))

<tsam> IRC-POLICE

<^ ^> hehe

<^ ^> im the irc-op

>somebody has stolen my nick :)

<oblisc> irc-polish

***tsam is now known as othertsam

<^ ^> order in the chann!!!!

***othertsam is now known as tsamtsam

*tsameret is utterly confused...

<^ ^> hehe

<^ ^> whoiswho???

<tsameret> ^ ^ *salut* :)

*pixie is now known as [^_ ^]

<tsameret> i'm tsam

<tsameret> :)

> im pixie

*^ ^ give ^ ^ her nick back :)

<mares> hey!!!

***^ ^ is now known as mad-1

***[^ ^] is now known as ^ ^

<mad-1> haya, u look better without the ears :)

***tsameret is now known as 0^ _ ^ 0

<0^ _ ^ 0> :)))

<mad-1> hehehe

***0^ _ ^ 0 is now known as pixie

<mad-1> *****+sameret*****

***tsamtsam is now known as tsam-me
 ***mad-1 is now known as med-1
 <tsam-me> med-1 welcome back.
 <med-1> i feel much better now.
 <pixie> we.... thats a nich laugh :))
 <tsam-me> me too :)))

In this game, these friends swap nicks to such an extent that they no longer know who anyone is!

In another nickname game I was witness to, in which the topic of conversation was “horses”, one person changed his name to <pony>, and the other people followed suit, changing their names to names of animals. They made “animal noises”, the dog chased the cat, etc. One person changed his name to “zoo_gaurd” and tried to restore order. When the animals tired of their game, they changed back to their original nicknames and resumed normal conversation.

Thus, although people stick to their nicknames over time, they will not hesitate to change their names for a short while, for the sake of a game. This is more or less analogous to a person wearing a mask at a party, and returning to his normal self at the end of the party, with the exception that here people take off their “second mask” and revert to their normal one; the person behind the normal nick remains somewhat disguised, whereas in real life the physical face is revealed when the mask is removed.

In my opinion, most “identity games” are the result of a high awareness of the limitations of expressing the self in this particular medium, an awareness of the lack of a defined identity and a way of exploiting these elements in order to play games. On IRC, the nickname is the most important part of one's identity, and when in Log 3 people exchange nicknames, they are in a sense exchanging identities. It is impossible to know who is who, and the disorder is so great that had it happened in a hostile environment, it might have been experienced as threatening.

In summary, we have seen several different types of games with nicknames: 1) games based on the meaning of a nickname and references made to it; 2) a solo game in which a person changes his or her nickname while trying to find his or her electronic identity and relating to what is happening around them in the channel; 3) a game with several players in which they change their nicknames in order to create an identity ceremony, (as seen in Log 1), and playing with nicks in order to play with identity itself (as seen in Log 3). Nicknames and the playfulness they invoke illustrate virtuosity and expertise in the medium, in its nature and in the linguistic creativity it enables.

Israeli Nicknames on IRC

Sasha Weitman (1985) researched the national orientations of Israelis, as manifested in the first names parents give their children. Weitman took the corpus of names from the Israel Population Registry maintained by the Ministry of the Interior. He checked the first names of native Jewish Israelis

during the years 1882-1980 (almost 100 years).

First names are symbolic identity tags meant to identify the individual person. In Israel, they are selected freely and carefully, at times even fastidiously (partly because they are selected to last a lifetime) they are exceedingly simple (relative to other symbolic identity materials) yet they are polysemic and an entire corpus of them evinces quite a bit of variety; and they lend themselves perfectly to enumerations, and therefore to aggregate measurements ([Weitman, 1985](#): 9).

Weitman found that there are distinct trends in Israelis' names over the years. The most significant finding in his research was:

.... in 1970.....the majority of Israelis had beaten a double retreat. On the national front, they had withdrawn symbolically both from the world of the Gentiles and from that of the Jews, and had retreated into their own territorially bounded national shell, while on the infra-national front, they had begun to shift progressively (since the start of the 1950's) from supra-individual virtues and collectivity-oriented values to a dominant concern with self-fulfillment as private individuals ([Weitman, 1985](#):63).

Patterns in the use of nicks among Israelis on IRC suggest that Jewish and collectivist, nationalistic components of identity have continued to weaken, in the 15 years since Weitman's study. The dominant language on IRC is English. Although some people can use the roman alphabet to "speak" other languages as can be seen on channels like #mexico, #russia, #france, and #finland, those who wish to communicate internationally "speak" English on the various channels. Nevertheless, if (as I've stated before) most nicknames reflect elements of one's personal identity and self, I expected to find cultural references related to the various nationalities, and maybe even use of the local language in nicknames.

For several months in 1994, I examined the lists of Israeli users. Since the Internet is relatively new in Israel, each list contains only between 10 and 30 names. Here are three illustrative lists; the ones pertaining to Israeli culture have been placed at the end of each list. On each date, by typing /who *.il, I asked the IRC software to tell me who is logged on from Israel (.il is the abbreviation for Israel).

20.jul. 1994 (/who *.il): <wilco>, <cock>, <tsam> <suzzzz>, <cooly>, <ehab>, <katana>, <cemetery>, <jack>, <kashka>, <^_^>, <avl>

In this first list, Avi is the user's legal name (a popular Israeli name). <tsam> is an abbreviation for <Tsameret>—this person's real name in Hebrew; <katana> may be intended to mean "small" (adjective with feminine ending). But most names have no obvious Jewish or Israeli content.

17.dec.1994 (who/*.il): <mister-x>, <blucher>, <Sunset>, <pashka>, <a_a>, <BeamMeUp>, <justl>, <AID>, <^_^> <sarmiento>, <Farman>, <giger>, <random>, <not_in_ID>, <firedemon>, <Meatalmout>, <tatu>, <Advisor>, <goldy>, <map>, <Levv>, <yalla>.

Among the second set of nicks, "Lev" means "heart" in Hebrew, and "yalla" is an Arabic word, that mean "c'mon", used also as slang in Hebrew. <goldy> may echo the Hebrew name "Golda," as in Golda Meir; but once again, the non-Hebrew/Jewish-related nicks dominate.

18.dec.1994 (/who *il): <DrBrain>, <sphinx>, <sarmiento>, <udjin>, <DeeJay>, <ofka>, <vit_>, <nick>, <hippy>, <darker>, <knopp>, <click>, <laughter>, <^_^> <Doggy>, <papakarlo>, <choo>, <phantom>, <cake>, <Binary101>, <Gera>, <yosi>, <chase>.

Once again, in the third list, few nicks are related to Jewish tradition or Israeli society and culture. "Gera" is a Biblical name, not very common today; "yosi" is a common Israeli name, but in this case is not the user's real name. The user admires an Israeli left-wing minister by the name of Yosi Sarid, and nicknamed himself after him. "Chase" can be pronounced in the English manner, but also as "kha-ze" in Hebrew, meaning "breast" or "bust." In short, we see that few people refer to Jewish or Israeli culture in their nicknames, no do many use Hebrew words to compose their nicks.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Because IRC is text-based, yet interaction is synchronous, a new genre of communication has developed. This genre combines written and oral features, as well as uniquely digital ones, blends different linguistic registers, and disregards the conventional rules of the language. It legitimizes any form of expression, provided it is understood by its readers. This new, frontier-like medium fosters new forms of playfulness, including play with nicknames. The IRC community has a high awareness of language and uses it in a virtuoso manner. We have seen that this virtuosity is often expressed through deliberate violation of conventional linguistic norms.

IRC and other chat forms offer the possibility of playing various identity games and experiencing different forms of behavior. A person can be arrogant one day and rude and violent the next. A person can be 18 years old one day and 60 years old the next. Even temporary gender changes are possible, enabling one to experience being a member of the opposite sex, and learning how s/he thinks and is treated in various interactions. In addition to the playfulness involved, IRC offers a unique opportunity to learn about human nature. As I mentioned earlier, there have been at least two instances in which male psychiatrists adopted a female identity in order to better understand their women patients. People can even exploit the medium to release sexual perversions or other repressed neuroses by expressing aggression and using vulgar language, etc., merely with the use of the keyboard.

As we have seen in this paper, nicks serve many functions. They are, first of all, a means to announce one's willingness to play. They are a kind of mini-ritual in which, each time participants log on, they declare their entrance into the state of play on IRC. Nicks become part of our personality and reputation in the computer community. They are used again and again. They are the means by which others recognize us and interact with us.

Nicknames are the key to making contacts and friends. This study has shown that although it is extremely easy to change one's nick constantly, in fact people rarely do so. Most people prefer the option of making friends via a stable nick to that of exploiting the medium for identity games.

There is considerable variation in the types of nicknames that people choose. Nicknames are an initial, and usually the only marker of people's self, or the self they are taking on. Rarely did IRCers in this study use their real name. In future research it would be worthwhile to interview those who preferred to use their real names, to see if they have common personality or demographic characteristics. Perhaps certain cultures educate their people to be more practical and unimaginative. Perhaps the common denominator is nonconformism, or maybe they are attached to their real names.

As expected, the largest category of nicknames, consisting of almost half of the total, was that of nicks related to the self in some way. It is natural for people to try and bring their identity to the fore. In a domain lacking physical elements, where each participant is represented by text alone, it is natural for people to manipulate this means, which is one of the few available for expressing some part of their character.

The next largest category was the one with nicknames related to the medium, technology and its characteristics (17%). Because it is a community with a strong affinity to computers and technology, many IRCers' occupations are computer related. This is a community with a high awareness of technology and technological change, for its existence and development is dependent upon them. In the category of play on words and sounds (11%), an element of the medium's linguistic/textual nature is apparent as well.

Results for the category of flora, fauna and object names constituted 16% of the names, and another 6% fell into the category of names adopted from literature, film, famous people, etc. This last finding was somewhat unexpected, for I had expected the category of names based on people of the socio-political world or even based on fictional characters to be larger than that of names based on flora, fauna and objects, the reason for this being that the former category includes some expression of identification with another person. Perhaps because IRCers are such an individualistic community, they prefer to relate their names to animals, plants or cars rather than being associated with other people. The smallest category including only 4% of the nicknames, related to sex and provocation. This finding ties in with my main conclusion, which states that although the medium is tolerant of identity games and deviations from social norms (including sexual fantasies, aggressiveness, and different forms of lunacy) without jeopardizing one's self, most IRCers don't take advantage of this privilege. Usually they prefer to keep the same nickname and identity, which for the most part is connected to a certain element in the real self which they wish to exhibit.

In the material world several people may have the same name, and it is highly possible that two very different people will be called "Jacob" for example, one being tall, handsome and reticent while the other being short, homely and mischievous. However, in the electronic world a name is an individual thing as it is the only parameter to characterize him. Most people stick to one nickname for a long period of time. Not being able to use one's nickname, for whatever reason, causes a feeling of oppression and confusion. When sitting in front of the keyboard, people don't know how their friends will identify them, after having lost their original nickname. This feeling is apparent in <bonehead> who stopped visiting IRC until he found a new nickname, and in <me3> who had to compromise and call himself <me33>. <me3>'s friends identified with him and conducted a ceremony showing their support by adding 33 to their respective names. This story reminds me of a real-life story of a boy who had to shave his head but felt ashamed and embarrassed about doing so, so his classmates, as a demonstration of support, all shaved their heads as well.

Other Aspects of Play with Identity

Another element which composes one's identity on the IRC, which hasn't been mentioned up till now, is the slogan a person can add to the information obtainable about him, the contents inside the parentheses, after the nick and the e-mail address. By entering the command "/whois nickname", it is possible to obtain a bit more information about the person. For example, if I enter the above command using my nickname: "/whois ^_~", the following message will appear on the screen:

`^_~ is mshaya@pluto.mscc.huji.ac.il (Haya Bechar) on channels: #^_~'sHome, #30plus via server irc.tau.ac.il (Tel Aviv University)`³

In the example above, my real name is stated, however by entering this simple command before entering the IRC: "setenv IRCNAME "so and so"" the contents inside the parentheses become "so and so". The use of slogans is very common; sometimes people include explanations of their nicknames, quotes from favorite lyrics, key sentences, something related to their "self" for example: (whats in a name :)), or (love is all i need) etc. This phenomenon is interesting to study as well, and it is worthwhile conducting a comparative study of nicknames and slogans because the contents of the

parentheses can expand on the meaning of a nickname. The possibility of defining oneself in up to 50 characters (including spaces), as opposed to one nine-character word, and makes it possible to further characterize one's identity more profoundly. Here too, in my opinion, it is possible to create a similar typology of slogans relating to the self, technological slogans, slogans that contain a play on words and sounds etc. It is worthwhile noting here that while the use of nicknames is elementary for IRCers, and everyone knows how to change his/her nick, the possibility of changing the slogan is not known to everyone, especially to new users.

Globalization, Individualism and the Weakening of Collective Identity

One of the surprises of this study was the finding that very few references were made to collectivities—nationalities, religious affiliations or ethnic identities. Nicknames related to the self, not to collectivities. Considering that individuals from so many nations interact on IRC, and that nicks are, as we have stressed, such a critical means of expressing one's identity, it was reasonable to expect that many IRCers would use their nick to express some aspect of various group identities.

These findings strikingly resemble results of a study of the meanings of domestic objects in the lives of middle-class Americans ([Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981](#)), in which the most ordinary domestic objects, from tables and chairs to TV sets to books and pictures, were found to carry important personal and family meanings, but rarely carried meanings associated with wider collectivities. The authors offer two explanations for the lack of associations between objects and religious, political or social goals: either that this has always been so in American society, or that there is increasing privatization and individualism in American life since the late 1970's.

The use of nicknames by Israelis on IRC is consistent with the interpretation that there is a weakening of collective identity among educated middle-class people around the world, these days. As we saw, few Israelis used nicks related to Israeli or Hebrew culture, and very few participants used Hebrew in their nicknames. It is widely known that in the nearly 50 years since the establishment of the State of Israel, there has been a weakening of pioneering collectivist values. Whereas an ascetic lifestyle and the mobilization of one's energies for nationalistic goals were once prized, Israel today is an individualistic, consumer society. There has been an erosion of the "civil religions" of Socialist Zionism and statism ([Katriel, 1986](#); Liebman and Don-Yehia, 1983; [Cohen, 1985](#)).

On the one hand, the language on the Net is English and the interaction international, so it is natural for users of different cultures to use English-sounding nicknames if they want their nicks to be understood. On the other hand, because a nickname is such a personal thing and so strongly connected to the individual, I would have expected to find more local cultural references in them. This phenomenon raises a few questions. Are we witnessing a process of cultural globalization? Is CMC aiding the emergence of the "global village"—one dominant world culture? And will cultural globalization remain within the confines of this medium or will it affect the material world as well?

I believe that it will affect our daily lives as well, and that, in fact, this is already happening. I sometimes feel it is easier to call my "real-life" friends by their IRC nicknames, even if they have foreign sounding nicknames. For example, among my IRC acquaintances is a person whose nick is <mares> and whose real life name is Oren. Even when I correspond with him in private e-mail, I find that I address him as "Mares," his non-Hebrew nick. Another friend, called "Tsameret" in Hebrew, and nicknamed <tsam> on IRC, is a teaching assistant at the university; she is called "tsam" by most of her students, and not Tsameret.

It will be interesting to conduct further study on nicknames in other non-English speaking countries to see if this cultural process is global, or one pertaining to Israelis only. Israelis have been showing signs of "Americanization" for a while now, and these signs can be seen in clothes, eating habits, English-language shop names, American television programs, etc. Impressions of nicknaming practices in other channels where the local language and culture are non-Anglo-Saxon suggest that in the latter channels there is more reference to local culture than in the Israeli case.

Reflecting once more on the findings on IRC nicks in the light of this discussion of research on the meanings of possessions to Americans, I am led to speculate that computer-mediated communication in general (e.g., ordinary e-mail) and IRC in particular both reflect and reinforce trends toward globalization of culture. It is my intention to expand on this research and to analyze several hundred additional nicknames I have accumulated during a year of participant observation. I plan to continue searching for new names with the objective of learning about the formation of a new type of community and its characteristics.

Nicks, Nickserv and the Regulation of Intellectual Property in Cyberspace

We have seen that people guard their own nicks, and even the nicks of their friends jealously. In effect, then, nicks are treated as a form of intellectual property, created and maintained in cyberspace. The struggle over rights to nicks provides a fascinating microcosm of more general processes now occurring in cyberspace. Major debates are now going on as to whether our traditional notions of intellectual property are transferable to the new cyberspace.

In an article on the future of intellectual property in *_Wired_ Magazine*, John Perry Barlow, a well-known commentator on cultural developments in cyberspace, wrote:

...the more security you hide your goods behind, the more likely you are to turn your sanctuary into a target. Having come from a place where people leave their keys in their cars and don't even have keys to their houses, I remain convinced that the best obstacle to crime is a society with its ethics intact.

While I admit that this is not the kind of society most of us live in, I also believe that a social overreliance on protection by barricades rather than conscience will eventually wither the latter by turning intrusion and theft into a sport, rather than a crime" (**Barlow, 1994**: 129).

Whatever the outcome of laws of copyright in the larger world, this study strongly suggests that informal regulation may work better than formal rules. I noted earlier that recently, the nickserv function has seemingly "died." This study offered strong evidence that players on IRC mobilize in support of one another when nicks are threatened. This finding appears to be a fine example of Barlow's vision, namely, that social relations in cyberspace will be based more on trust than we have found tenable in print culture. We should not jump to conclusions, however: I recently discovered that among participants in one of the zones of IRC, DALNET, there has been a revival of the nickserv function, with new rules, above and beyond those observed earlier. At the very least, then, the struggle over intellectual property in the new medium goes on, on IRC too.⁴

From Text to Multimedia: The New Technologies

In the last few years, communication among IRCers has shifted from text only to increasing use of sound and graphics. In addition, some people are using a technology called CUSeeME, a rather primitive form of video, in which players can see each other while they communicate by typing. Another innovation is Internet Phone, which enables individuals to hear each other, as in a regular telephone call. Many people exchange digitized photographs, and a number of archives of photographs now exist on the World Wide Web, stored in archives or on the Home Pages of several IRC channels. Thus, people can, in theory, know what a person looks like, though it is, of course, easy to send a photograph not of oneself.

The question arises whether IRC will change radically, in light of the above developments. In my opinion, it will not. The typed nature of interaction on IRC in its present state has enormous advantages: it guarantees that everyone will be heard. There is no competition for the floor—everyone who types, hits enter, and is not the victim of a netsplit, will eventually be “heard.” Technologies incorporating sound will be suitable only for two or three speakers to chat, or at most for very small groups.

It seems unlikely that even if a sophisticated version of CUSeeMe is developed, large numbers of people will be able to chat within the same channel in as orderly a fashion as is now possible. It is the anonymous character of IRC in its present state that invites such creative playfulness and such intriguing experiments with identity. I believe that people will actually prefer the present technology, even when more advanced ones which seemingly offer a fuller simulation of real-world chatting become available.

Footnotes

- 1 I would like to thank Brenda Danet for helping me a great deal with this article and for giving me the opportunity to develop it for this special issue on Play and Performance. I would also like to thank the many participants on IRC who shared with me the story of their nicks. Special thanks to <cLoNehEAd>, who shared with me the fascinating story of his nick. In addition, I want to thank the “regulars” on the IRC channels #^_`shome, #30plus, #nicecafe, #gb, #ircbar, #israel, and #truthdare. This paper was translated from Hebrew to English by Anat Gelb.
- 2 The world of IRC is very amorphous. There are many sub-environments that are used by IRC-ers, including Efnet, Undernet, Overnet and DALnet. Each of these environments is constituted by connections among a number of servers. Efnet is the largest. The Undernet was originally created by a group of people who were dissatisfied with patterns of communication on Efnet, and wanted to create a more friendly environment. DALnet is relatively new and apparently still very small, in terms of numbers of participants. All fieldwork for this study was carried out on Efnet.
- 3 An electronic address can be a point of reference as it points to the user's location; however, many people can access the IRC via a public address in various countries (using telnet), and then the address does not point to their real address. The “server” too does not point to the real address because by entering the command “/server server's-address”, one can connect to a server in the US or Sweden or anywhere else in the world, thus concealing himself altogether.
- 4 I am grateful to Brenda Danet for calling to my attention the parallels between the general debate about intellectual property in cyberspace and the ongoing debate about regulation of nicks on IRC.

BIBLIOGRAPHY